Content Warnings for:

*Depersonalisation
*Gaslighting
*Paranoia
*Quarantine

[*Theme Music: "Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here" by Theodore Goodwin.*]

INTRO

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The Underwood Collection, Episode 13: Charicature

[*Theme ends.*]

[*Tape recorder clicks on.*]

ULYSSES

Ah, to be back in the office again. I missed this, believe it or not.

Or. Well. I missed the actual curation aspect of this job— you know, putting together the artefact exhibits for the public and cataloguing the collection, *like I was hired to.* Just because we're working around Fear gods doesn't mean we can't have a healthy appreciation for well-done administrative work, unless you're Adriene, apparently.

Also, my chiropractor serves the Flesh, which— I'm going to deal with that later.

That said, I— I've been going through some of the old files of Frank's that the exterminators dug out last week, and— To be completely honest, I am *concerned.* There's a particular statement that seemed to resonate with him, and even though a significant portion of his notes are ruined— Termites, I think? — It's… Enough.

First of all, it starts with the phrase, "Though this Foundation doesn't serve the Stranger," which implies that this Foundation *does* serve something else, and that's… A thought we're going to put aside for later.

Frank, it seems, was interested in this statement because he was afraid of being replaced. By who — Or — What, I'm not quite sure, but speaking as

the person who has assumed his position after his— *Presumed*— Death, it feels particularly sinister.

I can't make out much else, but it looked like he wanted to leave to do something— There's a bit about finding the avatars responsible, and the word "*departure*"*,* but I don't know what the context was, or what he was talking about.

I wish I could just *ask*— I mean, I miss him. It's stupid, but I keep thinking about how we had to tell the volunteers— The high schoolers, the ones who do community service for exhibit maintenance — How we had to tell them what happened, and how… Quiet they were. Frank would've known what to say— He was good with kids, always talking about his daughter— But I just— Didn't.

[*Long pause.*]

Anyway. That's enough of that.

I'd also like to note that I'm specifically referencing everything I am finding *on this tape*, full disclosure. I don't want anything to get lost, and I don't want to put more work on Morgan than they already have, and anyone doing

research about the supernatural should learn about the entities at some point. So. Single tape it is.

That's been— A lot, but we… Should be back in the groove now. This is the... Statement of Annalisa Durand, regarding "People around her becoming fake." Original statement given 12 November, 2013. Audio recording by UC Bamba, Head Curator of the Usher Foundation, Washington, D.C.

Statement begins.

I don't- I don't think other people are unimportant, or less than me. I know this is going to sound like that, like I'm shallow and self-centered, but I'm not. I know, rationally, that every human being in the world is just as important as any other and that everyone has their own, equally significant lives.

Only, I've started feeling like there aren't many humans around. Real humans, that is. Sure, there's *people* everywhere, I live in a city, after all, but I'm not sure that all of them are *humans.*

I'm relieved to be here, to be honest. For some reason everyone I've seen since I stepped inside the building seems normal. I mean, I'm pretty sure

one of your receptionists has been mentally checked out since 2009, but I'm certain he's still human.

Sorry, I sound like a conspiracist. I might technically be one, although I don't have any theories on what they are or where they're from or what they're doing. But it seems like they're everywhere now.

It started small.

I was walking to work, and I saw him.

Just… A man. A completely normal man, as far as I could tell, crossing the street in the opposite direction I was.

Something about him felt out of place, somehow. Not like he stuck out, but like he suited his role as a passer-by too well. A sort of stock character, plucked out of television or a novel and placed down onto the street just before I intercepted him.

I think it might have been his smile. It's normally the expression that sticks out most.

His wasn't even really a *smile*, halfway to a grimace as it was.

Do you know how little kids sometimes grit their teeth and contort their faces into a caricature of an expression when you ask them to smile for a camera? This man looked like that, everything about his expression twisted a bit too far.

His upper lip seemed to retract up, folding under itself to reveal more of the neat white teeth and pale pink gums, while his lower lip stretched downwards in a sharp curve. His cheeks pushed up, making his expressionless eyes squint across the road, passing over me with no notice or care. He had a deep dimple, like a great big chunk of his left cheek was carved out to give him some individuality.

Something about the man's face seemed artificial. I thought it even then. Just a little too exaggerated, skin a little too smooth and opaque, without the warmth and texture of real flesh.

I brushed it off, of course. Just a trick of the light, the angle of the sun making him squint against it and make a face while he walked by. A little tidbit of paranoia in my commute.

No big deal, really.

I forgot about it for a week or two. Nothing bad had happened, just an uncanny encounter with a stranger. I had more important things to occupy myself with than some random man I'd seen once. He hadn't been remotely unusual, except that grimacing, plastic smile.

Something about the encounter had me examining people's faces as I passed, though, a little more analytical than I'd normally be. Like I somehow held some suspicion about their identity, although I had no reason to care.

The next one looked like an old woman.

She passed me on the street, too, almost bumping into me as we walked our perpendicular paths.

I honestly thought she was wearing a mask at first. One of those rubber theater ones, high quality and convincing but still not quite the same as skin. Good enough on a stage, but up close you can tell the difference.

Like the first man, it was just so… exaggerated. Deep, sagging wrinkles splitting chubby cheeks in two, a few sharp lines around deepset, rheumy

eyes. No fine lines anywhere, just surprisingly smooth skin with some dramatic markers for age. And the skin itself, despite having the fine hair and little tiny patternings of real skin, seemed even more opaque than the first man's, waxy and monotone.

I swear I could see the divide between body and face, but maybe it was just another deep wrinkle running from her ear to her jaw. Maybe she was just a nice old lady on her way to get a coffee, someone who happened to moisturize regularly and escaped some of age's more subtle effects.

I don't know. I don't really *want* to know for certain, because the chance of her being something else scares me too much. I'd rather cling to the chance I'm just deluded.

It's just gotten worse since then.

More and more people are just. Not quite human. At first I thought I was imagining it. Paranoid and overanalyzing and seeing things where nothing's out of place. But now there's just too many for me to discount it.

They’re still- still people, I think? They still go about their business and talk and eat and go to work in the same city bustle, but they’re somehow not quite right.

It’s like someone wrote a book with all the right characters doing all the right things and slowly started replacing people with their fiction-selves, one by one.

Like with the first couple encounters, initially I just noticed random people I crossed paths with on the street or something. Some little quirk or something about their appearance would leave me thinking they had nothing but empty space underneath. No concrete evidence or particular reason why, just fleeting impressions based on tiny snippets. None of them impacted me personally, but seeing them was still enough to throw me off-kilter for a bit.

I feel awful saying this, but it started getting really bad with customer service workers. I’d be ordering a coffee and the barista’s normal blank smile and meaningless pleasantries would be a little more manic with a little less behind them, or I’d be walking through a grocery store and an employee’s face would be so completely generic I couldn’t place how I recognized them. They could have been my neighbor or childhood best

friend or simply someone I'd seen in passing and I couldn't have told you which.

Even then, these were people I didn't know. I thought maybe I was just slowly becoming one of those nasty customers that don't see service staff as people. Thought maybe the older generation's entitled behavior really was an age thing, and I'd hit the barrier.

But people I recognized, people I knew by name, started to change before I could settle into my new life as someone who'd ask to speak to a manager over an out-of-date coupon.

The waitress at the diner I've frequented for years seemed suddenly distant, although she still made her normal jokes and remembered my order. Her bright red lipstick was a little more pristine, her eyes a little more rigid, her smile a touch wider. Nothing obvious, nothing that couldn't be explained away by coincidence. Just enough to be unsettling.

I only went again once. She was the same as the time before. Smiling and staring, without the warmth I was accustomed to behind it. An imprint of a woman I knew, changed in some tiny but profound way.

I sort of assumed I'd upset her at some point. It was the only rational explanation I could think of. I tried to apologize, but she just grinned a little wider, a little faker, and said, "Oh, of course not, honey! I'm doing just fine!"

Whatever it - she? It. - was, it wasn't a good liar. I decided avoiding the diner was in my best interest.

And that was that for a few days. The occasional not-quite-human face on the street or behind counters, but no more than that.

Then one of my coworkers got replaced.

I didn't know him well. His name was Andrew, I think, but I'd never really exchanged more than hellos with him. We were at the opposite ends of the floor, working on different projects, and without some common interest coming up we had no reason to talk.

But he still works on the same floor, and I see him almost every day. I noticed when he changed. One day, a normal middle-aged man, a bit tired and worn from juggling two kids and an office job, and the next, well. Mostly the same, I suppose.

His easy smile didn’t carry its normal cheer, and he didn’t seem to be able to entirely relax his face. Have you ever seen a movie made with puppets? The way they can smile and frown and so on but they’re limited by the layout of their face, more than any human would be? His face was like that. Like his default expression was this small smile that didn’t reach the eyes, and if he tried to frown or something the movement of his mouth would twist and warp his whole face.

The thing that was not Andrew didn’t seem inclined to risk that, so it just kept that frozen smile, corrupting the friendly, open expression into something uncanny.

This one spoke to me too. It caught me in the breakroom and started a conversation. At first, just niceties, but then it asked me if I noticed anything different.

I froze for a moment before saying something along the lines of I did notice something, had he gotten a new haircut?

Its smile twisted into the most honest expression I’d seen on one of the things yet, big and mocking.

“Yes,” said whatever wore Andrew’s face. “A new haircut.”

I left that conversation as quickly as I could. I don’t remember what I said, just the cruel humor in its eyes as I stuttered and made excuses to leave.

I saw nothing but masks on my walk home that evening. I mean, they almost certainly weren’t all those imitations, but the experience had shaken me so bad I couldn’t trust anyone to be human.

Called in sick the next day, and the one after. Didn’t leave my apartment for a full four days. I was too worried the next person I’d talk to would be the same as Andrew.

But come Monday, I had to go to work again. It was mostly fine. I mean, there were still plenty of hollow, waxy faces on the street, but a majority of the people I passed looked normal.

I avoided Andrew. Didn’t want whatever it was to have too much fun with me.

The switches kept happening. A receptionist in the building, the driver on the bus route I took to visit my brother, another coworker. Dozens of people

every time I walked down the street, all with fixed, exaggerated expressions. Dramatic, pouty frowns and deep glares and wide sharp smiles and comically stern faces all caught in a plastic rictus.

For the most part, I just ignored it. Nobody else who was still, y'know, human, seemed to notice or comment on it. Maybe we were all witnessing the same terrible thing happen and were just all too scared to say anything.

For weeks, months even, I went on like everything was normal, trying to push the fact that I was seeing fewer humans with each passing day into the back of my mind.

But every once in a while, one of them would be looking at me with some strange, warped smile, face trying to spring back to whatever expression was its default, just pretending to be human, and I could feel the nausea rising in the back of my throat.

I saw a group of them sitting at a cafe once, while I was going by. Four of them, and a person who was still herself, chatting over coffees. But she looked at me. That poor girl glanced up and happened to catch my eye and she still had a laugh on her lips but her eyes were terrified and desperate when they locked with mine.

I couldn’t sleep that night, just wondered what would happen if my friends got replaced, or my brother, or someone else I love. What if something replaced me?

So I spent days in this anxious haze, confused and stressed about who was a person, who was human, how could I define these things so obviously interacting with others and working in society as anything other than people? Lots of existentialism, and not the fun kind. Just frustration and fear.

I did eventually find out what would happen if one of them replaced a friend, though.

A group of us were meeting up for brunch, and she was running late. That wasn’t unusual itself- the group had a running joke about Melody-time, sends her the usual meet-up time as 45 minutes in advance if we don’t plan on the group chat.

But when she came walking up, cool and calm as ever, her distant, serene smile was stiff and her eyes looked hollow.

Someone asked her what took so long, and she laughed, face unchanging.

She looked me in the eye, and with the irony heavy in her voice, she replied, "Oh, you know me. Always losing myself to something."

The others laughed, assuming she meant an interesting TV show or maybe just sleeping in an extra hour, but I knew better. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't my friend, and I didn't want it to pretend to be.

I still stayed and ate with them. I didn't want it to win. So I just sat there and had my omelette and hash browns and avoided speaking to Melody's replacement as much as I could.

I cried when I got home. For Melody, of course, she was my friend and I loved her, but also for myself, for that loss of normality.

I cut as many ties as I could. First it was in a fit of impulse, isolating myself from my friends and stopping any amicable chatter at work in an anxious frenzy, but it eventually became deliberate.

Nobody for me to lose if I don't have anyone.

After a certain point I transferred to a work from home position. I couldn't stand looking around the room and seeing someone and knowing that under their face was not muscle and fat and bone, but something entirely unknowable, something other.

So I worked from home and only went out to get groceries or to do other essential chores or to visit my brother, and every time I stepped onto the street I was flinching away from every touch, human and not-human alike. Couldn't help scrutinizing every face I walked by, trying to figure out who was what. It seems like the amount of the imitations grew, but maybe my paranoia just had me seeing things in perfectly normal people.

But the things would sometimes catch my eye and grin at me, faces warping and pulling strangely as they contorted their fixed mouths to bear their teeth. Those ones, I'm sure, were anything but human.

My self-imposed quarantine means I've been drifting, unmoored from any form of real contact for months now, except for my brother. My sweet, kind brother, who laughed at terrible puns and would eat peanut butter right out of the jar and once cried when I showed him a video of a dog that was too cute for him to handle.

He was my touchstone to humanity, the one exception to my voluntary isolation.

He wasn’t what pulled open the door to his apartment last week when I showed up for our bi-weekly movie night. It stood there, staring down at me with my brother’s soft, gentle face, wearing a crude mockery of his dopey expression, the one he made when he was half-distracted by his own thoughts but still trying to pay attention to what you were saying.

The imitation of my brother greeted me after a second too long. It even used my childhood nickname. The sound of it, in my brother’s voice but from a face that was not his own, hit me in the gut. Bile rose in my throat and I realized that my brother was just as gone as Melody and Andrew and the hundreds of other people now substituted with hollow figures. I wasn't going to get to see him again.

I broke down, right in front of the door. It was just so much, after months of slowly losing half of humanity and cutting my contact with the rest. I couldn’t take losing my brother, so I sat there in a crumpled pile on the floor, crying my eyes out.

The thing that was not my brother comforted me. Not *really*, of course, but it crouched over me and pulled me into its arms, stroked my back in a pattern that might have been soothing had the movements not been jerky and too light to be grounding. It said my name, over and over, like it was taking it for itself and twisting everything I've ever been called into a taunt.

Oh, Lisa, Lisa, Annalisa, it's okay, you're okay Lalisa, it's fine, Lilou, Lisa, Lisa, Lisa. Lisa-bee, look at me? Look at me, Lisa, you're okay, I'm here. I'm here. Look at me. Look at your brother, Lisa.

And I did look at him. I was just too emotionally and mentally wrung out to ignore my brother's voice, although it still had his intonation all wrong.

It's smile, superficially sympathetic, was cold and mocking. I'd never seen that expression on my brother, and its face twisted in a way that his would not have, and it was wrong, wrong, wrong. I could only handle its sadistic impression for a few shaky breaths before the panic and grief and bone-deep terror set in and I was running, down the hall and down the stairs and to the third-closest bus station, where I stood to wait for the bus, staring at the ground and shaking with sobs and adrenaline.

I didn’t look at anyone on the way to my apartment. I was too busy trying to keep down the cold, heavy void in my chest from clawing its way up my throat, eyes too blurred with tears and terror.

I locked the door as soon as I got in, spent the rest of the day and the one after practically catatonic from grief and fear.

Eventually I looked up who to bring this sort of stuff to and, well, I figured you were the best organization available, so I packed a bag and got a train ticket.

I don’t remember a single face from the trip here. I’m trying not to look at people too hard.

If I don’t notice them they can’t goad me.

They’ve managed to ruin my entire life. I’m not letting them get one more ounce of satisfaction taunting me.

But deep down, I’m still scared. Are they going to replace everyone else? Are they going to replace *me?*

I’m still not sure which frightens me more.

Statement ends.

Most of the notes on this were Frank’s, which I’ve already addressed. There was unfortunately no concrete verification aside from this old thing-

[*Taps the recorder.*]

-and not enough leads on which to follow up to get anywhere with an investigation.

Frank did get an interview with Matthew, Annalisa’s brother, though he claimed he has no memory of the story she shared regarding him. Ms. Durand herself has said that, though she still feels that many around her are not people, she is in therapy to cope with the strain and attempting to break what others have been calling “her delusion.”

I’ve got to say that Frank’s remark about the Stranger makes perfect sense now, and I can’t imagine that Annalisa’s quote-delusion-unquote was anything but its work.

It seems that her own connection to her brother, even when he was replaced, has been enough to keep her afloat, so to speak. Human connection likes to do that in the face of fear.

Sentiments aside, I need to go grab a lighter. I don't know if it's strictly allowed in the building but honestly? I don't care. If Frank knew something was going to happen to him— if *something* is happening to the Curators here, if we're— getting replaced— my record on this tape is more than enough. Leaving the notes for anyone to find just feels silly.

Besides, it's not like anyone *really* needs to know, and if they do— I can tell them at my discretion. It sounds dramatic to say it's safer that way, but… it just might be.

End recording.

[*Tape recorder clicks off*.]

[*Theme music plays.*]

OUTRO

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